



CHAPTER 15

SOCIAL PERIPHERIES AND DRUGS: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY IN PSYCHOTROPIC TERRITORIES

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In the social sciences, it is now commonplace to say of any subject that it is ‘complex’. The topic of this chapter — drugs and social exclusion — brings together two subjects which are complex enough separately. Each of them is a lasting social problem and a source of riddles for the analytical perspective of the human sciences. Moreover, both subjects intersect at some point in the course of the development of social processes in western societies: if we look at drugs, we come upon social exclusion; when we look at social exclusion, we are forced to take drugs into consideration.

The starting-point for our ethnographic research was the description of illegal drug use in an urban-industrial context. At first, we had not even thought about relating this issue to social exclusion: our crucial interest lay in drugs and their use as symbolic features of youth behaviour. In this chapter, the following topics are discussed:

- the way in which, almost involuntarily, ethnographic research ‘forced’ us to analyse drugs and social exclusion together;
- the relationship between illegal drug use and social exclusion from the standpoint rendered possible by the ethnographic method; and
- the way in which fieldwork made us question drugs, social exclusion and the ethnographic method itself.

Building an ethnographic project

I believe that the real evolution of research ideas is not in accordance with the formal descriptions we read about research methods. Ideas are born, in part, from our immersion in the data and in the process of living ... Only by accumulating a series of reports on how a study is really conducted will we be able to go beyond the logical-intellectual image and learn how to describe the research process. (Whyte, 1955)

The ethnographic research we have been developing is part of a set of investigations carried out, since 1983, by the Centro de Ciências do Comportamento Desviante (Centre for the Study of Deviant Behaviour — CCCD) at the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences at the University of Oporto. These research projects have

been guided by an attempt to understand deviant behaviour as bio-psycho-social phenomena: studies have ranged from laboratory work in psycho-physiology to street ethnography concerned with social ecology.

'You don't get into drugs without getting out on the street'

Our experiences as drugs researchers began in a drug treatment unit. The excessive focus on a psycho-pathological approach, and the differences in speech we noticed between the users while inside and outside the institution, quickly led us to become critical of the clinical approach. In 1985, when we joined the CCCD, we were searching for a different way of looking at drug use — a naturalistic look. Our preferred method was in accordance with the research director's aim: the creation of a multidisciplinary research team able to conduct research ranging from experimental to ethnographic methods, from the laboratory to the field, from the biological to the social-cultural approach. In a sentence, he summarised the role of the latter: 'You can't get into drugs without getting out on the street.' The naturalistic look would study the phenomenon of drugs in its daily manifestations, in the actual places where its logic constitutes itself and interacts with the logic of social life, far from clinical and juridical reductionism.

'Extremes touch'

Initially, we produced a history of the drug use of young people in Portugal, so as to contextualise practices revolving around forbidden products and the meanings these had for the groups involved. In this way, we established a trajectory of youth psychotropism based on drug users' life histories.

To summarise very briefly, before the revolution of 1974 — which restored democracy in Portugal — drugs had very little social visibility. During this period, drugs were found only in cultural elites influenced by Anglo-Saxon pop-rock imagery. We named it the 'lysergic period in a restricted circle'. The drugs used were LSD and marijuana.

After April 1974, there are two clear-cut periods. The first lasted until 1980, when drug use was part of behavioural and symbolic constellations associated with youth subcultures (the hashish smoker 'freak' is the main character here). Adolescent drug use expanded and the social-political construction of the 'drug problem' began (see Agra, 1993, for an analysis of the construction of juridical instruments and care structures related to the 'fight on drugs'). The second period began around 1980 and was characterised by the progressive establishment of a 'hard' drugs market: heroin and the junkie become the protagonists. Although drug use had increased during the 'freak' period, in the junkie period 'harder' drugs began to be used and there was the progressive involvement of the socially less favoured.

When we first 'got out on the street', we chose to study an old historical neighbourhood in the centre of the town of Oporto which popular rumour then associated with drug users. Our aim was to produce an ethnography of drugs in youth

subcultures. However, the year was 1985, subcultures were less and less important as initiation contexts in the drugs scene, and we were obliged to change our focus. Other contexts and social actors turned urban peripheries into the scenarios for the new elements of urban insecurity: the junkie, the dealer and the drugs markets. In a period of 20 years, drugs had moved from restricted middle- and upper-class groups to the socially less favoured, until they reached the working class, socially excluded groups living in the town's social-spatial periphery. If, as according to a popular saying, 'extremes touch', then we can say that drugs had now touched both extremes of the social scale.

The 'drugs problem', previously approached as a youth management political issue (drug use prevention), a clinical issue (care and treatment) and a juridical issue ('war on drugs'), shows great adaptability to strategies aimed at its destruction. Ironically, confirming the popular 'virus' metaphor, the drugs epidemic invades the social groups and urban areas which are resistant to social control techniques. It is in the context of this deep change that social exclusion emerges as an analytical topic, and the evolution of the phenomenon led us to the main topic of our next ethnographic research: an urban periphery associated with social exclusion.

Psychotropic territories

Since 1990, we have been focusing our research on council estates, some of which are persistently called 'drugs hypermarkets' by the media. Between October 1992 and the summer of 1993, we lived in one of those estates, so as to maximise research opportunities and to immerse ourselves as much as possible in the context. What follows is a short summary of the issues developed on the basis of fieldwork data.

The drugs estates

The images of social exclusion are concentrated in these areas. The primary consequence is the increase of isolation foreshadowed by the estates' topographic position in relation to the town. They are places where the town is interrupted: our fieldwork data describe in detail the features of this spatial and social fracture. The analysis of daily life there allows us to look at these zones as parallel social spaces, often represented by their own inhabitants as territories 'under siege'.

Drugs in the estates

The two main social actors in these territories are the dealer (usually also a drug addict) and the junkie (addicted to hard drugs). They are the main characters in the drugs street scene, and their activities develop as interstices of space and time. We also focused on socialisation processes in these contexts: that is, on how one learns to live in psychotropic territories.

At a later stage, when reassembling the data — the ‘writing-up’ phase, which involves a degree of construction above that of the ‘writing down’ (Atkinson, 1990) — the hypothesis was developed that the present eco-social configuration of drugs is an adaptive response to its juridical-moral status. Such an adaptive response allows it to survive, and even expand, despite the numerous measures developed by the machine devoted to fighting drugs. It has at least three axes.

- *Economic adaptation.* Council estates associated with the drugs business are sites of economic fragility, and their inhabitants are either poor or vulnerable to poverty. Economic and labour marginalisation makes it much more likely that they will become involved in street drug dealing than inhabitants of other parts of the town. It might be asked why this does not occur in any poor or vulnerable site: it is because space needs to fulfil some conditions — it must favour ecological adaptation.
- *Ecological adaptation.* ‘War on drugs’ strategies have generated defensive reactions on the part of the street markets and the places where drug consumers congregate. Both moved to sites which repressive forces find more difficult to access. The drugs council estate is in morpho-topological discontinuity with its urban environment, making it possible for territories over which effective vigilance can be maintained to be constructed.
- *Psychological adaptation.* According to Wirth (1928), ‘the ghetto is not only a physical place but a state of mind’. The ‘state of mind’ offered by heroin is anaesthesia which, in a site kept away by the town — the ‘ghetto’ — allows one to be kept away.

The ‘drugs hypermarket’ is, then, organised as a territory. We have called it ‘psychotropic territory’, and, according to the environmental psychology notion of behaviour setting, defined it as ‘a place of concentration of social actors with a role in the drugs business ... It attracts people sharing an interest in a lifestyle in which drugs play a major role — it is ... a spatial matrix of a junkie street subculture ... Its main communicational feature is minimal interaction and it is structured as an interstice of space and time’ (Fernandes, 1998).

Conclusions

To carry out ethnographic research is a personal experience that leads to much reflection, particularly when it concerns those in an area on the margin of the normative town. In this final section, we discuss what that experience has led us to question.

The ‘world of drugs’ is a faraway entity that brings on feelings of fear and threat. At the social-political level this translates as the ‘war’ on a ‘plague’ or ‘epidemic’. Daily contact with this quasi-virus forced us to question these images, not in order to deny the social seriousness of some of its manifestations, but to look at the drugs world as a normal phenomenon in our societies. It is normal because the mechanisms of its

production are not located outside social dynamics, because it is repetitive and recurrent, and because it is established in the concrete practices of the concrete town.

The ethnographer's role in the phenomenon of drugs may then be that of helping its re-naturalisation. The voluntary alteration of the state of the mind through the use of psychoactive substances was turned into a strange, pathological and criminogenic behaviour during the western process of medicalisation and juridification; it is necessary to reinsert it in the social practices from where it emerged. After the attempt to silence it — the first aim of the 'war on drugs' — it is now time to let it speak: about our social mechanisms, particularly those that produce social exclusion.

Our aim here has been to discuss the potentialities and limitations of ethnography. As potentialities, we stress its openness and adequation. As limits, we stress its instrumentalisation.

Openness refers to the ability of ethnography to generate relations with other objects from the initial research object. In our case, drugs led us first to youth subcultures, and later to social exclusion and urban insecurity. We were also stimulated to analyse social-spatial peripheries of the town.

Adequation means that ethnography is useful to reach and observe layers of reality inaccessible to almost every other research method: those of the 'hidden populations' (Adler, 1990) whose social practices are developed 'backstage' (Goffman, 1961).

Instrumentalisation is to be avoided. It occurs when the ethnographer is used as an 'undercover agent' who may serve invasive control strategies. Ethnography might join a strategy that replaces a policed society with a 'softer' surveillance machine made up of social scientists.

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